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LOCAL

Is anyone in charge at L.A. City Hall?

By STEVE LOPEZ

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Los Angeles City Councilmen Mitch O'Farrell, left, and Mike Bonin speak Tuesday about the need to improve the city's new trash recycling program. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)



"You were had," said one angry taxpayer.

"You guys got crushed," said another.



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The topic?



L.A.'s Keystone Kops rollout of a new trash recycling program, which has featured a dramatic service reduction at a huge price increase for thousands of customers.

It's so bad, even the people who supported the plan are ducking for cover, pointing fingers or throwing everyone else under the bus.

Not everyone who spoke at Tuesday's Los Angeles City Council committee hearing lashed out at council members Nury Martinez, Paul Koretz, Paul Krekorian, Gil Cedillo and Mitch O'Farrell.

Some praised RecycLA or offered hope that the kinks will be worked out to accomplish the city's admirable goal of diverting trash from landfills and reducing the number of crisscrossing trucks spewing pollution.

But cleaning up the mess may not be easy, given how badly the city screwed up the deal. City officials signed a 10-year contract with seven companies, some of which dispute allegations of overcharging and say they're just doing what the contract allows them to do.



As The Times has reported, customers are getting dinged for added fees if the hauler has to move a trash bin a certain distance or use a remote device to open a gate. I'm still getting bombarded with calls and emails from landlords who say their bills have multiplied three, four, five and six times.

"We've always agreed with the objectives" of promoting more recycling, Beverly Kenworthy of the California Apartment Assn. told me after testifying before the committee. But nobody anticipated crippling fee increases, she said.

"I have clients who are panicking about how they're going to pay," she said.

Before Tuesday's meeting, council members O'Farrell, Koretz and Mike Bonin took their own shots at the program, which, by the way, they voted to approve in 2016.

"I feel I was sold a bill of goods," O'Farrell said.



Bonin said the RecycLA rollout was "nothing short of a hot mess."

And Koretz said bills have been "substantially larger than we ever dreamed possible."

Well, guess what, guys? This thing didn't happen overnight. It was in the works for years.



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Were you napping?

Were you happy to support anything sealed and delivered by a combination of labor leaders and environmental activists?

Did you owe a favor to the biggest cheerleader for RecycLA — Mayor Eric Garcetti?

Speaking of the mayor, I couldn't help thinking about him while attending Tuesday's



speaking of the mayor, I couldn't help thinking about him while attending Tuesday's hot mess matinee.

Let me explain.

Just one week ago, Garcetti cleared the air on who will serve as the next full-time city administrative officer. That's a crucial position at City Hall — one that requires sharp administrative skills, a strong sense of independence and a willingness to tell the boss the truth whether he wants to hear it or not.

In fact, the former city administrative officer, Miguel Santana, recommended against the current RecycLA contract. Santana argued that all the wage and environmental objectives could have been met, and fees controlled, by creating competition in each region of the city rather than awarding exclusive contracts.

Garcetti and a council majority rejected Santana's argument, and now we know how that turned out.

So whom did Garcetti pick to succeed Santana, who left last year?

To nobody's surprise, he went with the interim, Rich Llewellyn, who happens to be his former legal advisor and a longtime aide.

My first reaction:

Was Garcetti's wife unavailable?

Was his father, the former district attorney, unwilling to come out of retirement?

I'm not saying Llewellyn doesn't know his stuff; he's been around a while and gets high marks from some people. But the mayor, a cautious guy for somebody who keeps hinting at a run for president, went with the safest choice, even though in his telling, Llewellyn is someone who is "unafraid to tell you the unvarnished truth."

And then there's the selection process, as reported by my colleague David Zahniser.

Despite the importance of the job, Councilman David Ryu said he saw "no evidence that a comprehensive search was done."

One of the applicants, who serves as assistant city administrative officer, said he wasn't even interviewed. Garcetti, meanwhile, said the search was "exhaustive" and was narrowed down in the end to Llewellyn and another Garcetti ally, Deputy Chief of Staff Matt Szabo.

Look, the city administrative officer job isn't exactly an adversarial position, but it's got to be filled by someone who's willing to say you can't buy a new car when the roof leaks and the sidewalk is cracked.

The administrative officer has to be brutally honest about whether tax dollars are being thrown to the wind, as was the case when a CAO study pointed out that \$100 million a year was spent on homelessness without much coordination or impact.

The CAO has to play hardball in contract negotiations with unions that make campaign donations to the mayor and council members.

Los Angeles has a homeless problem that's getting worse.

The Times just ran a blistering expose (by Jack Dolan, Gus Garcia-Roberts and Ryan Menezes) about how cops and firefighters are missing years of work but getting twice the pay in a loosely monitored and widely abused pre-retirement program.

Another Times investigation (by Emily Alpert Reyes, Laura J. Nelson and Ben Poston) pointed out that the city paid \$19 million last year to settle lawsuits over injuries and deaths suffered by bicyclists, many of whom went down after hitting potholes or cracks in a city that promotes bike riding but can't fix its streets.

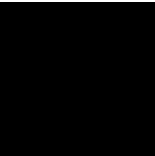
We've got projected budget deficits, employees at the Department of Water and Power don't pay healthcare premiums, and City Hall just hosted a RecycLA circus a week after Garcetti picked a buddy to serve as the city's top watchdog.

And how many people were interviewed for the job?

"More than one, less than 100," Garcetti told Zahniser.

That happens to be the same number of complaints I get each day about RecycLA.

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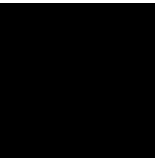
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Steve Lopez is a California native who has been an L.A. Times columnist since 2001. He has won more than a dozen national journalism awards for his reporting and column writing at seven newspapers and four news magazines, and is a two-time Pulitzer finalist for commentary – in 2012, for his columns on elder care, and in 2016, for his columns on income inequality in California. He is the author of three novels, two collections of columns and a non-fiction work called “The Soloist,” which was a Los Angeles Times and New York Times best-seller, winner of the PEN USA Literary Award for Non-Fiction, and the subject of a Dream Works movie by the same name. Lopez’s television reporting for public station KCET has won three local news Emmys, three Golden Mike awards and a share of the Columbia University DuPont Award.

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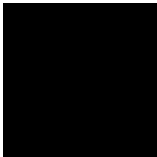


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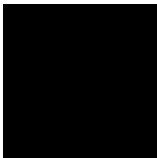
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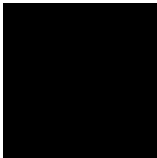
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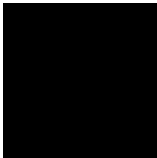
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